

ARMS CONTROL ASSOCIATION

Search

Arms Control Today

April 2003

[Printer Friendly](#)

▶ Arms Control Today

[Current Issue](#)[Archived Issues](#)[Subscribe](#)[Submissions & Letters](#)[Advertising](#)

▶ Subject Resources

▶ Country Resources

▶ Fact Sheets

▶ Treaties

▶ ACA Events

▶ Press Room

▶ Links

Register for Arms Control
Association email updates

IAEA 'Taken Aback' By Speed Of Iran's Nuclear Program

Paul Kerr

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials were "taken aback" by the advanced state of an Iranian gas centrifuge uranium-enrichment facility at a complex at Natanz during a February visit, according to a U.S. State Department official interviewed March 20. This revelation fueled concerns that Iran might be violating its nuclear safeguards agreement with the IAEA.

IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei confirmed in a March 17 report that he visited the site, which includes a nearly completed gas centrifuge "pilot plant" designed to enrich uranium, in February. **(See ACT, March 2003.)** The director-general had previously acknowledged the existence of the pilot plant shortly after his February visit, but details have emerged only in the last month indicating the advanced state of the facility.

The State Department official said ElBaradei observed approximately 164 centrifuges operating in a cascade at the pilot plant, along with parts to assemble approximately 1,000 more for a larger uranium-enrichment facility still under construction.

The State Department official also said that Washington and the IAEA believe Iran might have introduced nuclear material into centrifuges at another location in order to test them, because Tehran would not have invested in a large and sophisticated facility without sufficient testing. Such activity would violate Iran's safeguards agreement with the IAEA, an IAEA official confirmed in a March 25 interview. Safeguards agreements allow the IAEA to monitor the nuclear facilities belonging to a nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) member-state.

No nuclear material was in the centrifuges at the Natanz facility at the time of ElBaradei's visit, the State Department official said.

The advanced state of the facility proves Iran has a "far more robust nuclear weapons development program" than has been publicly known, Secretary of State Colin Powell said during a March 9 appearance on CNN's "Late Edition."

The State Department official said that Washington's current policy is to allow the IAEA to continue its investigation, emphasizing that the "credibility of the safeguards regime is at risk." ElBaradei said in his March 17 report that the agency is discussing with Tehran "a number of safeguards issues that need to be clarified, and actions that need to be taken."

Iran first informed the IAEA of the uranium-enrichment facility in September 2002, ElBaradei said in his report. Powell revealed during the March 9 interview that the United States provided the IAEA with intelligence about the site, but he did not specify when.

Iran Accelerates Nuclear Activities

Meanwhile, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami sparked additional concern about Iran's nuclear capabilities when he announced shortly before ElBaradei's visit that Iran has started mining uranium and is developing the facilities for a complete nuclear fuel cycle.

Earlier this month, Iran indicated that it is accelerating its nuclear activities. The state-run Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) reported March 3 that Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Hassan Rowhani announced that Iran would begin operating a plant located near Isfahan that converts uranium oxide to uranium hexafluoride, an essential component of the nuclear fuel cycle. Rowhani said March 3 that the facility is now complete, according to a March 14 Iranian state television broadcast.

Additionally, despite agreeing in February to discuss concluding an Additional Protocol with the IAEA, which is designed to provide for more rigorous inspections, Tehran now appears to have placed conditions on concluding a protocol. Vice President Gholamreza Aghazadeh said in a March 13 interview with Le Monde that Tehran will not conclude a protocol unless the United States lifts economic sanctions on Iran.

Aghazadeh argued that the sanctions block Iran's ability to obtain nuclear materials, although Tehran is allowed to acquire them under Article IV of the NPT, which states that states-parties "have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy."

Washington has repeatedly expressed concern that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons program. Iran will have a nuclear bomb by 2010 if it acquires the necessary technology and fissile material, according to a February Defense Intelligence Agency estimate. In addition, Assistant Secretary of Defense J. D. Crouch told the Senate Armed Services Committee March 18 that Tehran could "flight test" a missile capable of reaching the United States "by mid-decade."

Iran continues to deny that it is pursuing nuclear weapons, arguing that its

nuclear activities are transparent and consistent with IAEA safeguards.

Russian Cooperation Continues

Meanwhile, Russia signed a memorandum of understanding with Iran providing for "joint efforts" in several fields, including "peaceful" development of nuclear energy, according to a March 19 IRNA report. The precise contents of the memorandum are not yet known, according to a State Department official interviewed March 21.

Russia is constructing a nuclear reactor at Bushehr in Iran. Washington has long opposed the project out of concern Iran will gain access to dual-use technology that can aid it in developing a nuclear weapons program, although the reactor will operate under IAEA safeguards when finished.

Russia has agreed to supply Iran with reactor fuel, but only with the condition that Iran return the spent fuel. According to a March 12 IRNA report, Assadollah Sabouri, deputy head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization, said Russia will deliver the fuel in May 2003. The State Department official, however, said March 20 that the deal to provide the fuel has not yet been signed and that Russia's condition remains in effect.

In addition, the official said in a March 21 interview that Moscow has also given the United States "assurances" that it will not ship fuel until construction of a facility to store the fresh fuel from Russia is completed. The date of that facility's completion is unknown, he added. Russian Atomic Energy Minister Alexander Rumyantsev had also said March 13 that fuel would not be shipped until the storage facility was completed, Interfax reported.

The State Department official said March 20 that Moscow might change its stance on nuclear cooperation with Iran if that country is found to be in violation of its safeguards agreement. Russia has long cited Iran's compliance with IAEA safeguards as evidence that Tehran is not pursuing nuclear weapons.

Arms Control Today encourages reprint of its articles with permission of the Editor.

© 2001 Arms Control Association,
1726 M Street, NW; Washington, DC; 20036;
Tel: (202) 463-8270; Fax: (202) 463-8273